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ABSTRACT

School violence in British Columbia (Canada) is directly related to youth alienation and disconnectedness. The Native concept of connectedness or sense of belonging can be a useful guide for assessing the effectiveness of school violence programs. Connectedness, in this context, indicates that humans are part of a seamless web of creation in which each person is related to all others and to the earth, and that the spiritual dimension of creation is central to life. This report proposes a means for developing and evaluating a school violence prevention program aimed at reducing racism and social isolation of Native students in two predominantly white schools in British Columbia. The initial stage of the project involves input from Native parents, community leaders, and school staff to clarify strengths and sources of conflict between the Band, the school, and the larger community. The information and insights collected will be shared with these groups to improve communication and interaction. Without some attempts to build links among these groups, school violence prevention programs are unlikely to be effective. The results of the work with the adults will determine specific program recommendations to schools. Program evaluation will include analysis of incidents of school aggression or violence involving Native children as perpetrators or victims; interviews of parents, school staff, community leaders, and selected Native and non-Native students; review of school suspensions of Native children before and after the interventions; and school involvement of Native parents. During the first meeting, Native leaders suggested using drama or role-play in the project because of its congruency with traditional storytelling as a tool for conflict resolution. (LP)

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Preventing School Violence by Building Connectedness: A Local Initiative

Mary-Wynne Ashford

Successful school violence prevention programs bring alienated young people into relationships with others and help them find meaning in life and a sense of belonging. An initiative is designed to improve relationships of a minority group of First Nations children with their peers in two schools.

This project arose as a result of being invited to consult with a rural elementary school because of problems between a group of First Nations students in grade seven and other students in the school. This school in the Sooke School District is participating in a major violence prevention study directed by Riecken and Artz.

Research conducted by the author on violence prevention programs in schools is relevant to Native students because some Native traditions may be effective in reducing violence. In particular, the Native concept of *connectedness* is useful as a guide to assessing whether a program is likely to be effective. *Connectedness* in this context is used to indicate that humans are part of a seamless web of creation in which each person is related to all others and to the earth; and furthermore, that the spiritual dimension of creation is central to life.

Examination of successful school violence prevention programs reveals that they build connectedness between alienated young people and various dimensions of their lives—their relationships, their environment, their sense of purpose in life, and their belief system (Ashford, 1996).

Boredom and adolescence

Alienation and disconnectedness are often revealed when adolescents complain of boredom. For example, when young offenders are taken into custody and asked why they committed their offense, the most common answer is, "I was bored" (Hogg, 1994). Taking this response seriously means asking why

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boredom is an intolerable stress for some adolescents, and what might be done to reduce it. Boredom is a complaint of both Native and non-Native young people, although the causes and the meaning of the term may differ between individuals.

Boredom can be considered as having two forms: the transient irritation experienced by most people from time to time, or a chronic, corrosive and dysfunctional state that compels an individual to act to seek relief. The chronic form is described by young people who complain of boredom in their leisure time as much as in school or work. Abundant examples of the term *boredom* in association with anti-social or destructive behavior are found in the lyrics of the recent derivatives of rock music, especially in what is called "Metal" or "Grunge". The lyrics of Green Day's *(1994) Dookie* album provide a convincing illustration of anger, rage, and boredom. Green Day is a California band popular with grade eight and nine students in British Columbia.

The restlessness and frustration of boredom are highlighted in "Burnout", and the thoughts of a suicide bomber in "Having a Blast".
(Capitalization in the originals)

Burn Out

I declare I don't care no more
I'm burning up and out and
growing BORED
In my smoked out BORING room
. . . I'm not growing up, I'm
just burning out
And I stepped in line
to walk amongst the
DEAD . . .

Having a Blast

I'm taking all you down with me
Explosives duct taped to
my spine
Nothing's gonna change
my mind.
I won't listen to anyone's
last words
There's nothing left for you
to say
Soon you'll be dead
anyway.

The underlying rage and profound disconnectedness from other people expressed in these songs seem to be orders of magnitude different from the role plays studied in conflict resolution and anger management classes where issues raised are somewhat mundane—curfews, allowances, responsibilities in the home, and so on. If violence by the young man in the song above is to be prevented, re-establishing human connectedness with him seems essential. It is also key to helping him find meaning in life.

Let's consider a brief elaboration on boredom in adolescence in order to develop the basis for suggested interventions to reduce both boredom and violence. Boredom may be expressed as a need for increased sensation or as a need to find meaning in life. Programs that provide both excitement and increased meaning are most likely to reduce both boredom and violence. Some of the common ways to find meaning in life and to build connectedness are the following: engagement in a work, a creative endeavor or a movement; service or altruism; relationships; rootedness or a sense of belonging to a group; personal stance toward suffering; spirituality; and responsiveness to beauty in art or nature.

Significantly, Green (1985) describes a similar list important in the development of conscience. He writes of the necessity to attend to conscience as craft, as membership, as sacrifice, as memory, and as imagination. These categories closely resemble meaningful work, belonging, service, rootedness, and creativity. The parallels between the development of meaning in life and conscience seem compelling reasons to address these issues in schools. Connectedness between relationships and work is important to sustaining the meaning of both; connectedness between one's belief system and one's actions is important to behavioral change.

Connectedness is a central concept in many religions, especially those of aboriginal peoples, who often use such a term to describe a notion of harmony of all that has been made by the Creator. The aboriginal notion that problems arise when individuals lose their connectedness can be useful. Native healing circles and evolving practices in Native justice are concerned with re-establishing connectedness of offenders with the community and, through spiritual practices, with re-establishing the offenders' connectedness with their own spirituality and with the rest of creation. If connectedness is restored, it brings a deep respect for others that precludes further offending. Non-Native justice systems could gain valuable insights from these attempts to build justice on principles of community responsibility for determining appropriate punishment and restitution, and later for integrating an offender back into the group. Victim-offender restitution programs take a similar approach to restorative justice.

School Violence Prevention Programs

School violence prevention programs have evolved as a series of components or modules that are often implemented separately. The core of the most common programs includes some of the following: interpersonal communication skills; empathy training; conflict resolution; peer mediation; anger management; bullyproofing; bias awareness; parenting skills; and modification of school atmosphere. Some school programs have also been developed that apply Hirschi's (1969) social control theory (increasing bonding to the school; commitment to conventional activities; involvement in activities important for the student's future; and moral reasoning or belief). These programs are important because they are based on a well established theory of delinquency prevention. Glasser's (1990) *Quality Schools* approach is sometimes described as a violence prevention strategy based on control theory that Glasser has adapted from industrial management. One unusual approach to violence prevention is the use of stress reduction training for students and teachers—a remarkably effective intervention (Hamilton, Hare, Hierlihy, & Kilbourn, n.d.; Wilson-Brewer, Cohen, O'Donnell, & Goodman, 1991).

The most commonly used program in British Columbia elementary schools is *Second Step*. This program, developed by Seattle's non-profit Committee for Children, teaches empathy skills, communication, conflict resolution and anger management. Teaching techniques in violence prevention programs are interactive and experiential. Teachers model the strategies and use storytelling, small group discussion, role play, simulation games, and rehearsal of new "scripts" or habitual responses to engage children with observed and direct experiences.

The question that most concerns educators who must choose programs to implement is "What have we learned from the evaluations of existing violence prevention programs that might inform future efforts?" Unfortunately, empirical evaluations lag far behind program implementation, and most evaluations do not measure *behavior* of individuals before and after an intervention, in comparison with a control group. Rather, they measure changes in *attitudes*, generally in the form of self-reports, without being validated by official records of *behavior*, such as suspensions, arrests, or charges laid. Despite these shortcomings of the existing literature as a whole, some valuable studies have been conducted that permit us to draw several conclusions about what is most effective and what directions show the greatest promise.

First, it is important to recognize that the school is only one of several institutions and agencies (e.g., family, justice system, government ministries, community organizations) concerned with preventing adolescent violence. Studies show that interventions in high-risk families are consistently the most ef-

fective strategies for preventing adolescent violence (Tolan & Guerra, 1994). Three strategies in particular have been found to be effective: training parents in behaviors that decrease coercive relationships; supporting the emotional cohesion and shared beliefs of the family; and helping the family respond to external pressures such as unemployment. These strategies are important to educators because the first two can be incorporated in parenting courses in schools, and the third may be a basis for collaborative action with school counselors and community agencies. The finding that less coercive relationships with youth lead to less violent behavior provides support for proactive non-coercive strategies of classroom management. From the surveys of empirical research (Wilson-Brewer *et al.* 1991; Tolan & Guerra, 1994) three strategies have been found effective. The first is increasing parental involvement - particularly parental access to teachers, parental support for school activities, and increased opportunities for parents to have a valued role in the school. The second type of successful intervention is improving student motivation to attend and perform in school and engage in prosocial community activities. The third approach is to offer youth in general more opportunities for prosocial involvement in communities.

Project in Progress

Purpose: The purpose of this research is to measure the effects on violence of an intervention to reduce racism and social isolation of Native students in two predominantly white schools, one elementary and one junior secondary. The project begins with the adults involved—the Band parents, school staffs and community leaders (phase one) - and leads to targeted expansion of the existing violence prevention programs in the schools (phase two). This research assumes that the hostilities between the Native children and their peers reflects, in part, the social and physical isolation of the Native Band from the larger community. The results of the work with the adults will determine the specific programs recommended to the schools.

Background conflicts in the community affect relationships in the school. There is hostility between the Native Band and the school, as a legacy of residential schools; between the Band and the larger community, as a result of a proposed casino on the Reserve; and between the larger community and one school, as a result of a public conflict about school equipment. In addition, the Band is divided into two families with conflicting claims on leadership. Without some attempts to build links among these groups, the existing school violence prevention programs are unlikely to be effective.

Implications of Research

If strategies developed from this research are found to be effective in building a sense of belonging for the Native students within the school and community, the long-term effects will be very important, not only for the education of the Native students, but also for the harmony of the whole community. The lessons may be applicable to other school conflicts involving minority groups. Expansion of this pilot project to the larger Sooke community is the intended next step. It is hoped that the project will contribute to reducing the school drop-out rate for Native children.

Method

The initial stage of the project involves information gathering by a team of investigators to clarify the strengths as well as the sources of conflict between the Band, the school and the larger community. A graduate student will research and provide background documentation of the history of the areas of conflict between the Band, the school and the community.

The information and insights collected will be shared with the groups in order to open the way for improved communication and interaction. This process might be considered as "cultural diplomacy". The goal is to make possible discussion of strategies to deal with grievances. The ideal would be to have all the parents work toward a super-ordinate goal of providing the best possible school experience for all the children.

When the areas of conflict are clarified and sufficient trust has been established to begin joint discussions of strategies, background information about relevant initiatives that might be useful will be offered, and, where possible, implementation of the programs chosen will be facilitated.

Evaluation

Evaluation data will include:

1. Comparison of the number of reported incidents of school aggression or violence involving the Band children as perpetrators or victims before and after the interventions. Although playground observation would reveal more subtle incidents, targeting a minority group for close observation on the playground might be seen as discriminatory; therefore, the less intrusive measure of comparison of records is chosen).

2. Analysis of interviews of parents, school staff, community leaders and selected Native and non-Native students at the beginning and end of the project.
3. Comparison of the number of school suspensions of the Band children before and after the interventions. Suspensions as a disciplinary measure are viewed very negatively by the Native people. A change in this measure may reflect either a change in behavior of Band children, or a change in the policies or attitudes of school administrators.
4. Comparison of the school involvement of the Band parents before and after the project. This may be measured by attendance at Parent Advisory Meetings or Parent-Teacher interviews or other events. Attendance at PAC meetings has been identified by parents in both the Native and non-Native groups as a source of tension. Increased attendance would indicate a decrease in this tension.

Progress Report

At the first meeting with the Band, the Native leaders raised the possibility of a project involving drama or role play as a tool to decrease racism. This idea generated considerable excitement and enthusiasm because it is congruent with traditional storytelling as a tool for conflict resolution. A further suggestion from the Native leaders was that the project could include student mentors from Pearson College of the Pacific (a nearby international college very highly regarded by the Band). The College has previously encouraged students to work as mentors on the Reserve.

A drama project could be a rich source of meaning for both Native and non-Native students. It has the potential to build close relationships, to increase pride in personal heritage, a sense of belonging to something outside oneself, a sense of meaning in the suffering experienced in racial injustice, an understanding of Native Spirituality, and a creative outlet for all the participants. All of these factors are likely to increase connectedness. Performing involves risk-taking and thus also fulfills the need for excitement.

The development of this project must come from the children and adults involved, with the researchers facilitating communications where possible. The power of the intervention is in the deep involvement of the participants in resolving their conflicts through their own strengths. At this early stage, the humor, patience and underlying goodwill of all the adults involved give some basis for optimism.

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